

## Driven West, Taken East: A World War II Memoir of the Eastern Front

**Vilnis Bankovi s**

**Maris Roze, Translator**

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*Though he doesn't loom large in world history, Bankovi's embodies the everyday men and women whose stories need to be told.*

Vilnis Bankovi's distills almost a decade of war recollections into an eloquent and heartfelt memoir *Driven East, Taken West: A World War II Memoir of the Eastern Front*. Bankovi's captures the tribulations and tempestuousness of combat with authority.

Eastern Europe does not tend to receive the bulk of historians' attention when it comes to World War II, so this graphically told story stands to captivate American audiences who may be less familiar with its events. Bankovi's relates, in visceral and powerful language, the despair that gripped him as a young soldier forced into the invading German army. He survived the Germans only to be captured by the invading Russians, who forced him into a gulag in the north of Russia. Bankovi's was not able to return home to Latvia until five years after the close of the war.

Bankovi's rejects literary embellishments in favor of straightforward prose. Nonetheless, the events and circumstances that he relates are engrossing. While discussing the train journey toward the Soviet gulag, Bankovi's writes: "For a while, we tried the tactic of not informing the guards that someone had died. This ensured a larger share of bread for the rest of us."

Though Bankovi's was trained as a surveyor and draftsman, his writing reflects the sensibilities of a philosopher. "The tramp of foreign soldiers' boots has left a deep imprint on our country's soul," he writes. And of his homeland: "Latvia is home to many talented and creative people and can be proud of the most beautiful folk songs in the world." Bankovi's's poignantly rendered story is proof that it is impossible to squelch the soul of such a people.

*Driven West, Taken East* has been well translated from the original Latvian by Maris Roze. The book includes an invaluable foreword by Valters Nollendorfs, board chairman of the Museum of the Occupation of Latvia. Nollendorfs gives just enough historical background to make reading Bankovi's's account more understandable. In addition, there are black-and-white photographs and a few maps that elucidate the narrative.

*Driven West, Taken East* is a touching story about an individual Latvian. Though he doesn't loom large in world history—neither a superhero nor a major player in the events of the war—Bankovi's embodies the everyday men and women whose stories need to be told. In his memoir, Bankovi's does this work admirably.

JOHN SENGER (December 14, 2015)

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